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Slaughter Issues Statement on WHTI Implementation

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Slaughter Will Introduce Legislation Tomorrow to Oversee Implementation

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Buffalo, NY - Congresswoman Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Chairwoman of the House Committee on Rules, today issued the following statement on the implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative which takes effect today. Slaughter intends to introduce legislation tomorrow to oversee the WHTI implementation and identify any potential harmful effects so that the necessary steps can be taken to mitigate these effects and protect northern border economies.

“As with many people who live along the U.S.-Canada border, we in Western New York do not think of the bi-national Buffalo-Niagara region as two separate countries, but rather as one community with a river running through it. We have shared principles and values, and rely on an intertwining economic relationship that is vital to our prosperity.

As you may know, I have long felt that we are not ready for WHTI implementation, and I have expressed my concerns about the potentially devastating effects that WHTI could have on our northern border communities. In fact, in 2007 I led the charge in Congress to delay the implementation of WHTI from January, 2008 until June, 2009.

It has become clear over the past year that this delay has proved to be absolutely necessary. Consider what has been done since the original January 2008 deadline in Western New York alone towards WHTI implementation:

The first NEXUS enrollment center in Western New York was not opened until September of 2008, and the RFID technology that is so critical to the success of Passport cards, NEXUS cards, and Enhanced Driver's Licenses, did not “go live” at the Peace Bridge in Buffalo until this past November. At other important border crossings in New York State and Michigan, this vital technology was not set to be working and active until April; less than two months before today's final WHTI implementation.

Despite this progress being made, and despite the Department of Homeland Security and State Department issuing their WHTI certification, I, along with a number of my colleagues remain wary of the readiness of WHTI. But we remain committed to ensuring that it is implemented in a way that will not harm the cross border trade and travel that is so critical to our border communities.

During President Obama's visit to Ottawa earlier this year, he and Prime Minister Harper stressed the importance of a healthy U.S.-Canada trade relationship to bringing both countries out of the current economic recession. I would contend that a successful WHTI implementation is an important aspect of this trade relationship, and a failed WHTI

implementation could have a devastating effect on not only border communities, but on the broader national economies.

The economic downturn facing both countries has already dramatically affected cross border travel and trade. Statistics from the Public Border Operators Association show that passenger, truck and bus crossings at all New York and Michigan border crossings in January of 2009 decreased by an average of over 16% from January 2008 levels. In Western New York, traffic at the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge and the Peace Bridge decreased by 19% and 13% respectively. If WHTI is not implemented properly it will only compound the current negative trend in commerce across the border.

For this reason, tomorrow I will introduce legislation to place significant oversight on the implementation of WHTI to identify and mitigate any harmful effects of the new requirements.

This legislation will enable us to identify WHTI's impact on travel and trade across the border, measure enrollment into frequent traveler cards, analyze staffing and infrastructure levels at the land and sea ports of entry, measure the economic impact of WHTI and to study its effect on delays at the border and on overall border security.

This legislation will allow us to identify any problems with WHTI implementation prior to the 2010 Olympics, and hopefully quickly determine what actions need to be taken to ensure that our border and our regional economies are healthy. Furthermore, a second report that will be due on June 1st, 2010 will help us assess the one-year impact of WHTI prior to the main tourism season along the northern border. Finally, the legislation will ask GAO to conduct an independent review of the economic and security impact of WHTI on the northern border.

My colleagues and I are looking forward to working with Secretary Napolitano and Secretary Clinton on this important issue."

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